

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Not just academics: Supporting international graduate students at an East African private university

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Abstract

The number of students enrolled in higher education outside their countries of origin increased from 0.8 million in 1975, to 2.1 million in 2000, and to 3.7 million in 2009 (Ryan, 2012). This growing trend of student mobility leads to increased university competition for students around the globe. However, little is known about the experiences of international students in Africa. This lack of understanding could leave the continent at a disadvantage for attracting and retaining international students, while other parts of the world continue to benefit. To begin to address this gap, I conducted a qualitative phenomenological study at one private university in East Africa that attracts about 20% of its population as international students.

As International Student Coordinator at this university, I interviewed 13 graduate students from various countries and conducted participant observations on campus for three years. I aimed to understand students' perceptions of their learning experiences. This article focuses on students' non-academic learning. Students' positive and negative experiences highlighted the difference that student affairs and administrative staff can make in the quality of students' educational experiences. A needs model shed light on students' non-academic experiences. Student affairs and administrative staff were essential in 1) providing pre-arrival information, 2) meeting students' initial basic needs, 3) connecting them with others, keeping immigration documents current, and 5) understanding the new academic system. Ecologically, students were required to make a variety of connections in their adjustment process on campus and beyond. If the university could adequately address international students' non-academic issues, then students would be better able to focus on their main purpose: their academics. It is recommended that the university revisit its procedures and develop more holistic international-student-friendly policies. Then, it could better support the learning of its present students and attract more international students, thereby more greatly impacting the world.

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Keywords

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Introduction

African students have long pursued graduate degrees abroad. At great financial cost, some have battled racial discrimination, immigration hassles and loneliness only to find that their studies do not fit their contexts once they return home (Hyams-Ssekasi, 2012, p. 50). Institutions outside Africa are actively recruiting African students. These universities have recently become aware of the importance of the quality of the student experience. Institutions and countries appear to be increasingly cognisant of the importance of satisfied international graduates, and are thus looking to ensure that their foreign students receive the education and overall student experience they were promised during the recruitment process (Verbik & Lasanowski, 2007, p. 28).

In today's competitive graduate school environment, continuous improvement is critical just to stay viable. Institutions within Africa, too, must focus on the quality of students' experiences if they hope to attract international students. Yet little research exists regarding the current state of international students' experiences in Africa. This article provides a case study of one university in East Africa that has attracted international graduate students from its inception about three decades ago. As its International Student Coordinator for four years, I observed the experiences of international students and noticed gaps in our services to them. In an effort to better serve them, I undertook a qualitative study of their learning experiences at the university. My findings may offer insights to similar institutions in Africa, which also desire to see international students not only survive but thrive in their graduate studies.

Purpose, design and methodology of the study

This study describes international students' learning experiences at a private university in East Africa, which I will refer to here using the pseudonym Trinity Global University (TGU) to preserve its anonymity. I sought to understand 1) how international students describe their academic and non-academic learning experiences at TGU; 2) how their past learning experiences influenced their expectations and experiences at TGU; and 3) whether and how international students changed while at TGU. Findings regarding the students' academic experiences, how they say they have changed and the pedagogical implications are being published elsewhere. This article focuses on the international students' non-academic learning experiences pertaining to student affairs and administration.

The research context

This is a case study of TGU, a small, private, international university in East Africa, with about 600 students. TGU is a hybrid of different international and local educational systems that have influenced its history and present (Buenfil, 2014, pp. 219–220; Dimmock & Walker, 2005, p. 81). Like many private institutions of higher learning, TGU began as a

seminary. The original goal was to provide quality theological education at masters level in Africa, for Africa. It has recently expanded into doctoral and bachelor level courses and beyond theological topics. Typically, 19–23% of the student body at TGU has been international students (non-local-country passport holders) from about 28 countries. Most come from English-speaking countries around Africa. However, students have also come from North America, Asia, Europe, Australia and South America in the past five years. Some are only on campus for a few weeks each year for intensive programmes, while others live on campus for up to four years or more, if they do consecutive programmes. Since international students get priority for on-campus housing, the campus community is very international.

At TGU, the faculty is also international. In 2012–2013, about half of full-time faculty members (10 of 17) came from outside the country. However, as TGU adds bachelors courses, the percentage of international faculty is decreasing (Kihika, 2011; Mutheu, 2013).

Even with this rich history of international education, the university focuses little attention and few resources on international students. The few policies in place relate to transcript equivalency assessments, immigration regulations, settling students in, and housing. Most of the administrative and student affairs staff are locals.

Population and sample

I conducted the interview portion of this study during Term III of the 2012–2013 academic year. During this academic year, 107 (including 76 graduate) international students enrolled at TGU. They held passports from 23 countries. This study focused on graduate students, because of TGU's history as an internationally recognised graduate institution. Because I believed that on-campus, full-time students may have experienced TGU more intensely than commuters, I invited only enrolled graduate international students living on the TGU campus and studying full-time, with at least one previous term of enrolment, to be interviewed. Out of the 24 masters students and 14 PhD students ($N = 38$), 13 agreed to be interviewed in depth ($n = 13$). While this sample was not large, it represented about one third of the population. Also, these 13 represented near maximum variation in age, programme, family status and passport country.

Methodology, data collection and analysis

Since I sought to understand international student experiences in depth in a particular context, I chose a qualitative, case study approach. This was appropriate, as qualitative research involves looking for rich, deep data that will give understanding of a certain phenomenon in context (Mugenda & Mugenda, 2003, p. 204). I looked for patterns emerging from the narratives. In contrast, quantitative research looks for patterns in numbers. It usually requires larger populations and sampling numbers. The size of the sample in qualitative research is usually smaller than in quantitative research, which was appropriate with my small population. The results are not generalisable, though they may be cautiously transferrable to very similar situations (Creswell, 2009, p. 13).

In contrast to quantitative research, current qualitative methodology acknowledges the researcher is not totally objective or detached from the research participants (Charmaz & Bryant, 2011, p. 192). Some researchers even claim that researchers should be members of the groups of people whom they study in order to make legitimate knowledge claims about them (Miller & Glassnar, 2011, pp. 136–141). At the least, researchers should be familiar with the participants' lives and try to experience the natural setting of the phenomenon under study (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2007, p. 31). As an international student and International Student Coordinator, I was well positioned to conduct this type of research. In order to understand the lived experiences of the students and the meaning they made of their experiences, I chose a phenomenological, interpretive approach for this study. Participant observation and interviews were utilised. Participant observation notes were taken over three years (2011–2014), which captured a broad range of experiences of many international students on campus. These included skits in chapel, small group discussions and one-on-one discussions around campus with international students from many countries and programmes. Prior to this study, in 2011, five similar interviews with international students were also conducted, transcribed and analysed. These were included as part of the participant observations. The participant observation notes were analysed and used to triangulate the data from the interviews. I interviewed 13 students in depth (an average of 90 minutes per interview) in order to get a more focused understanding of their experiences and to hear their stories. Twelve allowed me to record and transcribe the interviews. For the other one, I took notes. Each interviewee double-checked his or her transcription. I then analysed the interviews and the participant observation notes using the computer program WEFT QDA. I labelled various concepts and open-coded them into categories, then analysed them again into more abstract axial codes. Themes eventually emerged for each research question, which I also sent back to interviewees for review. Conducting these member checks ensured the trustworthiness of the data and findings. I will describe the themes related to non-academic learning experiences, using pseudonyms for the students to preserve their anonymity. Each theme arose from many students expressing the viewpoint, but I am only able to share a few representative quotes here due to space constraints.

Research findings and discussion of related literature

Though classes were challenging, most international students at TGU found the non-academic issues to be more frustrating. Physical, social, financial and cultural issues powerfully affected their lives and their learning at TGU. This Canadian student's sentiments were echoed by many others:

Most of the challenges have not been in the classroom. They've been outside of the classroom. There have been some really great things outside of the classroom and some more difficult ones. Outside of the classroom, there have been some cross-cultural learning experiences, for better or for worse. (Paulo, personal communication, April 29, 2013)

Administrative issues and cross-cultural communication issues caused him more difficulty than his courses. Just as adult educators begin their programmes with needs assessment (Vella,

2002, pp. 228–229), student affairs staff must first understand the experience of the students and the needs they express if they want to support them well and improve on the service they offer. Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory points out that if people's basic needs are not met, energy is not available for higher-level needs (Lau, 1984, pp. 68–69). If one assumes that pursuing graduate studies is a higher-level need, then his theory suggests that lower-level needs must be met before meeting higher-level needs can be attempted. This hierarchy may be debated, but international students confirmed that attention to the various levels of needs was important for them to concentrate on their studies. When students first arrived, their basic physiological needs were of foremost concern. The security issues soon became important, as did the social needs. Although Maslow's theory has been critiqued as an unreliable predictor of decision-making behaviour, I use it here simply to categorise the students' various reported issues and to illustrate how institutions can support the whole student.

Figure 1: Maslow's hierarchy of needs (adapted from Lau, 1984, pp. 68–69)



Before arriving, international students needed admissions information, campus information and some contacts. They had questions about what to expect, what to bring, and where they would live. Most found admissions staff friendly and helpful.

Physiological needs

Upon arrival, international students had many basic physiological needs. Most needed transportation from the airport or bus station and a phone contact. Once on campus, they needed meals, keys to their housing and a campus tour. They needed internet access and phone SIM cards. Then they needed to access their financial accounts, to shop for food and household basics, and to navigate public transport. Once settled, these physiological issues did not disappear. For some, financial worries about these basic needs persistently distracted them from learning, such as the Congolese student below.

Before going to class in the morning, I'm like, 'What am I going to eat today?' ... I know that maybe after lunch I'm not going to cope even in the library ... I am hungry. I cannot make it ... these kinds of things ... they really disturbed me. The finances were not there. (Luka, personal communication, May 13, 2013)

This student could not focus on his higher-level needs while hungry. While local students in other places also experience financial stress (Yakaboski & Birnbaum, 2013, p. 41), international students have fewer places to turn for help. Many of these students had relied on family, church members and friends in the past. Now, for the first time, they felt truly on their own, depending only on God to provide. A South Sudanese student explains:

You don't have scholarship for yourself or even for your families. And here you cannot run to any nearer person asking for something when you come to school fees, when it comes to upkeep. These are some of the challenges we are facing and these can also influence our studies, 'cause as a family man, when my children, if they don't have meal in the house to drink, so I cannot concentrate on the study. I will focus twice. I will think, now they don't have something and I'm here in the library. So I cannot be stable ... (Tomas, personal communication, May 20, 2013)

Back home, this student could borrow from neighbours when in need, but at TGU, even his fellow countrymen were too constrained to help. These issues led many to pray more and to have more compassion for others in need. Some with full scholarships wished the TGU community could do more to support their fellow struggling students, although TGU has a benevolence fund for students' basic food needs.

Some (especially students from Nigeria, DRC and South Sudan) struggled with the weather. Although they had been sent information about the weather before arrival, they could not imagine how cold it would be. They had to purchase more warm clothing and blankets as soon as they came for themselves and their children.

Safety and security

Financial problems also affected students' sense of security. One student told of his most stressful moment: being "de-registered" from class because he could not pay his fees. At this lowest point, he was ready to pack up and go back home to Malawi (or another country to avoid the shame of returning home a failure). Miraculously, he received a last-minute scholarship and stayed (Daudi, personal communication, May 27, 2013). Although the campus itself was viewed as a secure, peaceful place, the country was involved in a war during this time. Terrorist attacks, armed robberies, carjackings and pickpocketing on public transport occurred regularly, often nearby. Many international students came with traumatic experiences, such as first-hand experiences of war. Some got news while studying that their relatives were in crisis or had been killed in conflict back home. Student affairs personnel organised trauma workshops for such students.

Immigration status problems

Still, the most unsettling safety issue for the majority of international students was their immigration status. Acquiring and maintaining valid immigration status was extremely frustrating for many students. Some students delayed submitting their documents, the government was slow, but many also questioned the school's follow-up on their student visas. Meanwhile, students and their family members worried about being in the country illegally, though they reportedly developed patience in the process. International students at institutions around the world share these immigration concerns, in various forms (Hyams-Ssekasi, 2012, pp. 127, 249). One TGU student described his feelings:

You feel as if you are not treated well ... There are times that the service delivery is not adequate and sometimes even availability when you need help ... it kind of cuts across but, you see, it's more severe for international students because you feel you are far away from home and then you sometimes say, for these people, whatever happens, they are at home, but for you ... the impact becomes more and sometimes you begin to wonder, "Is it because I'm not from here? Will it be better if I'm at home?" ... For example, the last time my [student visa] expired, I knew I felt insecure when I was going out, you know, supposing, somebody, a policeman says, "Are you legally in this country?" (Jeremiah, personal communication, May 24, 2011)

This student felt that staff did not provide services in a timely, adequate way. He wondered if it was because he was a foreigner. He felt the impact sharply, being far from home.

Unclear administrative structures

Maslow notes that clear, orderly structures of administration can provide security (Lau, 1984, p. 68–69). Students expected the administrative systems and structures to be like those of the institutions they had attended previously. They soon realised that they had to learn a new educational system, a new "academic culture" (Cortazzi & Jin, 1997, p. 77). Some from large secular universities were confounded by the way education was administered at TGU, as one Nigerian student reported below:

Here you don't quite know where to go. Maybe that is where you get some of your worry from. You don't quite know which systems to follow. And even when you do that, the general spirit around does not see you as if you are doing something right even when your motive is right. (Matteo, personal communication, May 15, 2013)

When structures were unclear and inefficient, students felt as if they were set up to fail. They worried about being seen as rebels if they pushed for information. Comparative education experts Teferra and Altbach (2003) point out that the challenge of ineffective administration in higher education runs throughout the continent:

Efficient management and administrative systems are of paramount significance to the productivity and effectiveness of any enterprise; academic institutions are no exception. By and large, however, African universities suffer from poor, inefficient, and highly bureaucratic management systems. Poorly trained and poorly qualified personnel; inefficient, ineffective, and

out-of-date management and administrative infrastructures; and poorly remunerated staff are the norm throughout many systems. (Teferra & Altbach, 2003, p. 7)

These concerns may contribute to the following theme, if staff members themselves feel unappreciated and underpaid.

Uncaring administrative staff

While the interviews were not intended to evaluate staff's effectiveness, some staff performance issues affected students' learning experiences. Many international students felt uncared for by some of the administrative staff. At the time of the study, administrators and student affairs personnel seemed threatened that students (not just internationals) were trying to take power, boycott activities or push too strongly for their rights at UGU, as was happening in other places (Yakaboski & Birnbaum, 2013, p. 45). Some international students who were unaccustomed to campus tensions between students and administrators were shocked by this.

Students questioned the efficiency and communication skills of staff in some offices. Some felt that the administrative problems at TGU kept recurring without being resolved. Some felt that administrative staff needed professional development to reach international standards as a university, as noted in other studies on student affairs in Africa (Major & Mangope, 2014, pp. 24–31; Yakaboski & Birnbaum, 2013, p. 43). Also, most staff members had no experience of being a foreigner, so perhaps that contributed to their perceived lack of empathy in dealing with internationals. On the other hand, several staff members were seen as caring and helpful. Admissions staff attracted some of the students interviewed.

Inaccessible finances

The system of handling student finances at TGU caused great stress for some international students. Some were surprised to find that money that sponsors had previously sent to their student accounts for their upkeep was not available for some weeks, or even months. They needed it for living expenses, including food, but could not access it. At the same time, they did not want to paint a bad picture of TGU to their sponsors, such as the Ethiopian student below:

I have personal sponsors to support my studies here in the country. ... They [TGU accounts office] are not able to pay me in time. The money was sent one month before coming here. Every term, still until today, they do that ... but I get it in the fifth week or for example, in the ... second term, I got it at the eighth week of the term, after dying [metaphorically]. That is great challenge for me. (Emmanuel, personal communication, April 26, 2013)

If they were able, students set up an external account into which sponsors could deposit their upkeep money, but some, like the student above, were not able to change the agreements previously made with sponsors. Tracking electricity bills and payments also caused confusion and frustration. The international (and others) students lacked trust in the finance department, as noted by the American student overleaf:

There's always been a lot of debate on campus, on how finance should be dealt with, but the majority ... are very disappointed in the finance department – how they handle students, the double standard. They expect a lot of students but then they don't come through on their part. (Samuel, personal communication, June 15, 2011)

While they may have been demanding of students, the finance department was also challenged by students who were behind with their accounts. Students sometimes also had unrealistic expectations of when money would arrive and could be accessed.

Administrative difficulties at places such as TGU are interconnected with lack of funds (Yakaboski & Birnbaum, 2013, p. 33). Universities around the world are in financial crisis, “but the magnitude of these problems is greater in Africa than anywhere else” (Teferra & Altbach, 2003, p. 5).

Love and belonging

Making friends took time. With demanding studies, not much time was available for these graduate students. Families relied on each other, but even then, roles changed. Others missed spouses and family members back home. Singles often found other singles from the local and the international community. As noted in the next discussion section, in time, most of these international students felt accepted by the community. Many developed deep relationships with people from various countries, through programmes set up by student affairs, the student council, or just through classes, roommates and informal networks. Some even married fellow students. The great cultural diversity on campus also brought challenges. While most expected cultural challenges, they still found them surprising and difficult when encountered, like the Nigerian student below:

You are coming from Africa, you don't expect such changes. You assume that it's going to be like Africa – you are Africans, you have similar outlooks and all that – then all of a sudden there's this rude shock or awareness that, Oh, we're Africans, but there are so many things that are different. The first thing is the social life – you know, how they socialise is different from how we do it. So that creates a little bit of disorientation. Maybe you expect to be greeted and you are not greeted ... but with time, you just get used to it. (Jeremiah, personal communication, May 24, 2011)

After the initial confusion, most international students had learnt cross-cultural skills, in addition to making many cross-cultural friendships.

Occasional discrimination

Most international students at TGU were African. In contrast to studies of African international students done elsewhere, such as in the UK, international students at TGU reported less racial discrimination, especially from fellow students (Hyams-Ssekasi, 2012, p. 197). International students at TGU generally found the host country students to be more helpful and friendly than host students in other places (Terkla, Rosco, & Etish-Andrews, 2007, p. 1). However, a few international students experienced discrimination at TGU.

Several students felt that they had been very unfairly represented (even falsely accused) in communications with the TGU administration, possibly because they were foreigners. They felt issues were taken to higher levels very quickly and without hearing both sides of the issue. This led to frustration and a sense that they (as international students) could not speak up when they had problems, as they would not be fairly heard, as noted by the student below:

One of the challenges here at [TGU] is xenophobia, quite frankly, here as international students ... not ... in the classroom, but outside and even to some extent, dealing with administration ... What I've learned basically ... I have to be very careful about what I say. (Paulo, personal communication, April 29, 2013)

Other international students, too, learned to keep quiet. Perhaps the country's colonial history influenced how some internationals were treated.

Missing home and the support there

Students missed the support they would have experienced if they had been studying back home. Some would have been able to get emotional and financial help from family, church member, and neighbours, such as this Malawian student who reported:

Learning was a bit simpler [at home], easier to me than how I'm experiencing it over here ... At least there, family members and relatives, whenever I'm stuck, I would consult. They would support. (Daudi, personal communication, May 27, 2013)

Students felt lonely and missed home. When cultural challenges came, students reminded themselves that they were only here for a short time and that "this is not home". They challenged themselves to adapt. They were determined to focus on learning and finishing, as the student from South Sudan below pointed out:

If I start to do something, I make sure I finish that. So as soon as I step on this soil, I make sure I graduate. In fact, for the first year, it was quite challenging, but now I am sure I will finish. (Tomas, personal communication, May 20, 2013)

Some who felt lonely found friends to talk to, pray with or run with. Some found ways to go home on breaks to join their families. Some sought out other foreigners to talk to, like the Nigerian student below:

I miss home. That, for me, affects me ... I sometimes feel that, this is not my country or somebody makes me feel like ... this is just not your place. So that reality is there. And sometimes they do come in a very sharp way that does affect ... you ... I kind of prepare my heart for the best or for the worst, so when I am down ... I realize that way, this is home for some people, human beings like me. That helps my inner man and sometimes I talk about it with friends who will not be offended ... international students. (Matteo, personal communication, May 15, 2013)

He learned to cope with homesickness when it came. Most students shared these feelings, though they coped in different ways.

Change overload and cultural adjustment

For many international students, all of these issues combined created what one researcher labelled “change overload” (Loss, 1983, pp. 49–55). Change overload means that one difficulty or even several difficulties would be manageable, but many at once, particularly upon arrival, can leave international students very stressed. Students at TGU especially felt this in their initial weeks at TGU. Although the “U curve” theory of cultural adjustment has been questioned lately (Black & Mendenhall, 1991, p. 245; Kohls, 1979, pp. 68–70; University of Minnesota, 2012, p. 31), this group of international students, from their retrospective report, generally followed the basic curve. They were excited upon arrival at TGU, then discouraged as they struggled with many bewildering issues, and then, gradually, they developed relationships and coping skills to operate effectively in their new location.

Self-esteem

The competence and confidence levels of some students were challenged by the heavy workload and by having to learn many new skills at once, as noted by the Congolese student below.

I struggled like the first three terms. I was like totally confused between the IT, and the library, and the classes and actually in my undergraduate we don't use computers. This was one of the hard things. Sometime I can write and in the middle of my assignment, I lost it. You can just feel the frustration. (Luka, personal communication, May 13, 2013)

Students like this had a steep learning curve that affected their self-esteem – negatively at first, but then positively as they learned these skills.

English and academic skills

Students who lacked fluent English struggled to listen, speak, write and read at the levels required for their graduate studies. Like international students in other places (Cammish, 1997, pp. 143–146), they felt doubly burdened. They felt disadvantaged in class amongst peers with fluent English. An Ethiopian student expressed his concerns:

That's another challenge, in fact, to write in a good way, since we are from different countries ... we don't have English. Our people, they do not speak English. But here, since we are from different countries, our teachers, they look to our work, according to their standards or according to the other students, not understanding our problem, or our weakness in English. (Emmanuel, personal communication, April 26, 2013)

Many of these felt they greatly improved their English skills while in the country, which benefits them in the future. TGU students also felt some second-language anxiety, but they did not seem to experience as much as some international students in Europe, perhaps because most TGU students did not speak English as their first language (Charter *et al.*, 2010, pp. 8–9; Zhao & Wildemeersch, 2008, p. 55).

Pressure to succeed

Several TGU students talked of the pressure to succeed, since they were on scholarship or their families had sacrificed for them to study. Some said they would have quit in the difficult times if they could have avoided the shame. Other studies have noted similar findings (McLachlan & Justice, 2010, p. 31).

Being humbled

At TGU, as in other places, some students gave up high status (such as bishop, pastor, or teacher) to become students at TGU. They were treated as students. Being humbled was difficult, but character-building.

These self-esteem issues were more related to academics than directly to administration. Yet, the quality of services and support by student affairs and administration could either add stress to the students' whole experience or alleviate stress.

Self-actualisation

The student affairs and administrative sectors at TGU were meant to support students by enabling them to pursue their goals in their graduate studies, thus moving them towards fulfilling their purpose and calling in life. The academic content generally did provide this, as expressed by the Canadian student below:

Here the learning process is for the purpose of ministry together ... We're part of a community and we're contributing to the greater good of the church and the academy across the continent, and also a sense that our studies are relevant and needed. That's also something that our teachers have given us a strong sense of ... So there's a lot of mutual encouragement and encouragement to pray and believe that this is God's will for us. (Paulo, personal communication, April 29, 2013)

He appreciated the faculty's faith in him and was inspired to fulfil his destiny by the faculty.

Another student developed his calling by serving on the student council, where he learned about different decision-making styles. As an American, he learned cross-cultural communication skills appropriate to the local country that have helped him in his career, as he reported in an informal follow-up interview (Benjamin, personal communication, April 11, 2015).

Summary of findings

TGU international students voiced a variety of non-academic issues that affected their learning experiences. Given the continual financial constraints, the university had to accomplish its goals with minimal funds. Yet, many issues mentioned by TGU international students were not costly to remedy. For example, they needed timely information before arrival. Upon arrival, they needed assistance with basic needs, like transportation, housing, food, shopping, SIM cards, internet access and meeting people. They hoped for staff to be available when needed. Students wanted to be treated kindly and fairly, respected, listened to, and supported. They wanted clear administrative structures and processes to follow, with

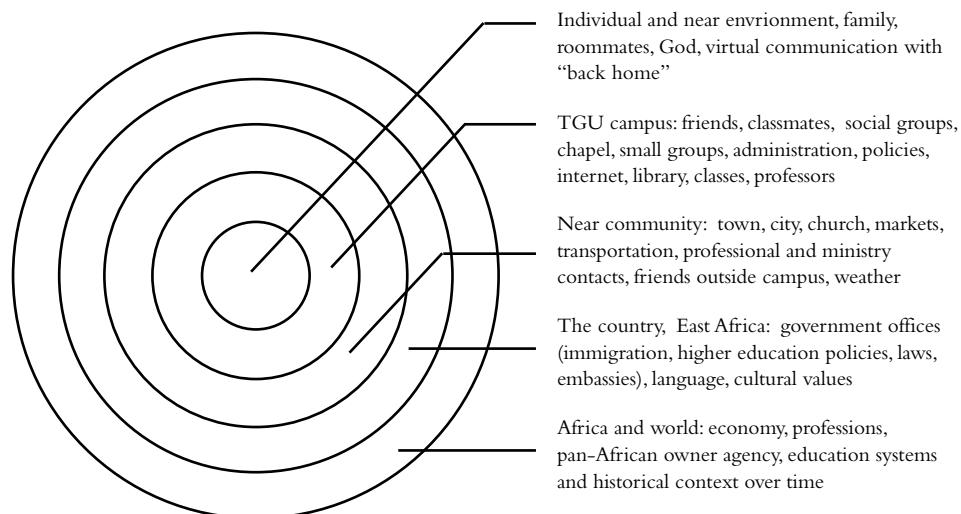
accountability of staff. They required timely access to their upkeep money. They needed valid immigration status to feel safe. Some needed support in their cultural adjustment or relationships. Some required academic support skills to help them develop confidence and competence in English, academic writing, and computer and library skills. With attention to these needs, they were able to concentrate on their higher-level needs of fulfilling their callings and the purposes for which they came to study at TGU.

The whole community can contribute to all aspects, but, at TGU, faculty focus on meeting the higher levels (self-esteem and self-actualisation) through academics, which is generally effective. Fellow students generally fulfill the love and belonging level, although they may need help making connections. The role for student affairs staff and administrative staff, therefore, is mainly addressing students' physiological and safety and security issues.

Discussion

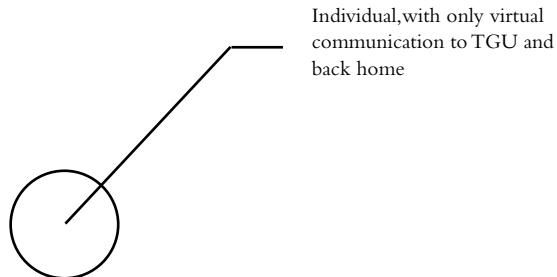
International students enter a new environment when they arrive at TGU. Even beyond campus, new international students must interface with many new sectors. Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory illustrates holistically these various sectors in the environment (Papalia, Old, & Feldman, 2004, p. 42). Adapting Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory to an international student's context at TGU may look something like the following chart:

Figure 2: TGU international student's ecological reality, adapted from Bronfenbrenner's bioecological theory



In reality, the lines between the systems are not clear; they all interrelate. Yet, this chart shows a well-nested person, tucked securely into all the systems around him/her. Internationals probably felt like that back home. However, the ecological reality for most international students upon arrival looks more like the following chart:

Figure 3: Typical international student's ecological reality upon arrival at TGU



Most TGU international students arrive with very few contacts and no local web of relationships. African systems operate on relationships. If student affairs personnel can help students to connect with others and build relationships from the very beginning, they will likely settle in more quickly and be able to focus on their studies. These relationships can help them to learn the campus culture and the environment beyond campus. Student affairs staff and administrative staff at TGU seem to focus mainly on enforcing general policies set by administration and responding to student issues as they arise. A more holistic, student-focused approach may work better to serve present international students and to facilitate attracting international students in the future. Specifically, student affairs staff can endeavour to be available, give timely information, proactively provide empathy and support, and link students to others who can help them. As noted in a previous editorial of this journal, peer interaction is key to integrating into the institution (Moja, Schreiber, & Luescher-Mamashela, 2014, p. 4). Indeed, interaction with their peers is one of the highlights for international students at TGU. Staff can facilitate this by immediately pairing them with a local student “buddy” and with an international student friend. As classes start, students can be connected with an upperclassman in their programmes and with a faculty mentor. Some students find these links themselves, but student affairs personnel have a role in making sure no one struggles silently.

Further studies

Further studies on international student support are needed. Researching ‘best practice’ models of new international student orientation and ongoing international student support at universities around Africa would be helpful. Researching international student adjustment in Africa would also prove fruitful, such as studies on the differences between various groups of students (i.e. from certain regions or first-time travellers) in order to customise orientation for various groups.

Conclusion

TGU administration and student affairs must serve the end goal of the university, which is educating students to transform their world. The quality of the non-academic services plays

a critical role in international students' educational experiences. For quality educational experience, quality administration and student support services are foundational.

To build strong student support programmes, a clear understanding of international students' experiences is essential. From there, policies and services can be revisited and developed that deal with real student issues in specific universities, from a holistic perspective. Various players on campus have different roles in this. Student affairs and administrative staff can particularly impact in the areas of information, basic needs, safety/security and connections. When international students are adequately supported in their non-academic campus experiences, they can focus better on their academics. Educational institutions that support international students well will find that their impact spreads across the world when students graduate. They may also attract more international students.

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